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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000407

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DEPT FOR EAP, EAP/MTS, EAP/MLS, EAP/INR, INR/B

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [RP](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: CATHOLIC BISHOPS CALL FOR "MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY,"
BUT REFRAIN FROM DIRECT ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICS

REF: A. MANILA 0081

[1](#)B. 05 MANILA 5965

[1](#)C. 05 MANILA 4322

[1](#)D. 05 MANILA 3946

[1](#)E. 05 MANILA 3167

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Classified By: Acting Pol/C Joseph L. Novak for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: At the conclusion of their semi-annual meeting on January 29, the Catholic Bishops' issued a long statement that called for "moral accountability" and recommended that Filipinos "search for truth" through Constitutionally-mandated processes and via non-violence. The Bishops' went on to call for electoral reform and, in a separate statement, expressed concern about the effects of mining. In crafting their pastoral statement, the Bishops were very careful not to inject themselves into politics directly, which was good news for President Arroyo, who was in no way singled out. End Summary.

Bishops' Statement

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) met in its semi-annual plenary session at the Pope Pius XII Center in Manila, January 28-29. (Note: The group usually meets in plenary in January and July. End Note.) It was the first such meeting under the leadership of Archbishop Angel Lagdameo from Jaro, Iloilo, in the central Philippines, who assumed the CBCP Presidency when Davao Archbishop Fernando Capalla stepped down in December 2005 (ref C). The CBCP's last such plenary occurred July 9-10, 2005, at the height of political turmoil in the country (ref D). At that time, the CBCP issued a statement urging the President to work actively to clean up politics, but did not ask her to step down. Many observers believed the CBCP's July 2005 statement was the turning point that allowed President Arroyo to regain her political footing and remain in office.

[1](#)3. (U) The latest pastoral statement did not directly deal with politics, nor name names. Instead, it focused primarily on issues of morality and spirituality. The Bishops observed that politics, as now practiced in the country, had failed to make public servants accountable for wrongdoings. They asserted that the root cause of ongoing political infighting was an "erosion of moral values" and claimed this "moral

decay" was manifested by dishonesty, corruption, and a preoccupation with narrow political interests. The Bishops called for a "transformation of cultural values and structures" and a renewal of Philippine public life. They stated that the "search for truth" must be pursued through Constitutionally-mandated structures, such as the Office of the Ombudsman (which attacks corruption involving GRP funding), the Commission on Audit, the Commission on Human Rights, the Sandiganbayan (anti-graft court), and Congress. Echoing the July 2005 pastoral statement, the Bishops stressed that they did "not condone violence or counter-Constitutional means" in resolving political and other societal conflicts, but instead wanted Filipinos to unite and work peacefully together on common problems.

Other Issues

¶4. (U) Other highlights from the January 29 pastoral statement included:

-- Electoral Reform: The Bishops called on the GRP to help restore confidence and trust in politics by reforming the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) and modernizing the electoral process.

-- Constitutional Change: The Bishops did not lend their support to any of the various plans being discussed related to Constitutional change. However, the group called for the mid-term elections scheduled for 2007 to proceed as planned. (Note: In its December 2005 report on proposed changes to the 1987 Constitution, a Malacanang-created "Consultative Commission" recommended canceling the 2007 elections by extending the term of incumbent officials until 2010. Many lawmakers and observers denounced the proposal -- ref B. End Note.)

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¶5. (U) In a separate statement, the Bishops asserted that indigenous people, farmers, and fisherfolk were worried about the negative effects of mining. They reiterated a 1998 CBCP request to the GRP to recall all approved mining concessions and to disapprove pending applications. The Bishops argued that allowing mining companies to prevail over "the people's rights" to mineral wealth amounts to "violating their right to life." The statement also claimed that large-scale mining operations threaten health and environmental safety and destroy "the cultural fabric" of indigenous peoples, citing past experiences with international corporations.

Comment

¶6. (C) In crafting their statement, the Bishops were very careful not to inject themselves into politics directly. This was part of a relatively recent trend: the Bishops -- with the approval of the Vatican -- have been taking a more hands-off approach to politics since the retirement of the outspoken Jaime Cardinal Sin in 2003 (ref C). This decision to refrain from overt political engagement was good news for President Arroyo, who was in no way singled out in the statement. Some in the Opposition had told us that they hoped that the Bishops might take on President Arroyo by directly and forcefully urging her to "come clean" over various scandals that have effected her administration, but -- in the end -- they were disappointed.

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